

Holy Week 2017

Beginning with a Passion

Passion Sunday – Year A

Matthew 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-7

Philippians 2:6-11

Psalms 22:8-9, 17-18, 19, 20, 23-24

Matthew 27:11-54

On Passion Sunday we are reminded in the words of Isaiah of the prophetic voice of both our Messiah and His Church. Paul briefly theologizes about the mystery and ultimate purpose of the Incarnation. Then everything comes together with the reading of the Passion according to Matthew, whose telling of the death of Christ includes such particulars as the suicide of Judas, Pilate's hand washing, foreboding dreams and warnings by Pilate's wife, threats of riots and a final earthquake as Jesus breathes his last (the only Gospel to include these details!) – an appropriate beginning to the busiest and most spiritually charged week of the year!

Many events of the Passion According to Matthew are repeated or celebrated during the course of the week that follows. As we enter the holiest week of our liturgical year, all the liturgical celebrations of the next six days are anticipated in Palm Sunday's reading of the Passion.

Shortly before Easter, in many places during Holy Week, and in some, on the morning of Holy Thursday itself, priests, deacons and laity gather with their Bishop as

he blesses the Holy Oils to be used for this Easter Vigil's rites of initiation and for sacramental anointing throughout the coming year. The priests gather to concelebrate the Mass, manifesting their communion with their Ordinary, to renew our commitment to priestly service.

Wednesday's gospel revisits Judas' plot to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

On Thursday we come together in our parishes for the Mass of the Lord's Supper (read as part of this Sunday's Gospel) celebrating the institution of the Holy Eucharist and Jesus' final gathering with his disciples before being led off to be crucified. At the end of the Mass the Eucharist vacates our parish Churches, removed to another location, leaving them devoid of the Eucharistic presence of Christ for the following two days. At the altar where the Eucharist is reposed, parishioners attend in prayer on into Holy Thursday Night. (At such time John 13-17 could be appropriate reading.)

On Good Friday, the one day of the year when Mass is not celebrated, we again participate in an extended Gospel reading,

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recalling Christ's death and burial in the Passion According to John. The Eucharist returns briefly as we conclude our celebration of Christ's death on the Cross by receiving Communion consecrated on Holy Thursday. Many gather in prayer and song, in liturgy and devotion, before the Church throughout the world takes one final day of rest.

On Holy Saturday, the Church is silent, except in prayer, waiting with baited breath for the moment when the Church launches its celebration of the Resurrection with the Easter

Vigil, the climax of the liturgical year. The Vigil begins in silence and in darkness, broken only by

the light of the Paschal Candle. We are reminded through multiple readings of God's ongoing process toward the redemption of His people. For the first time since Ash Wednesday the Church sings acclamations set aside during our forty days of penance. For the first time since Holy Thursday Mass is celebrated, and Christ's Eucharistic presence returns to tabernacles throughout the world – but not before new

members are welcomed into the Catholic community through the waters of Baptism and the anointing of Confirmation. Thus the fifty-day celebration begins!

But THIS Sunday, this Palm Sunday, all of these liturgical celebrations are anticipated, and we enter the holiest week of our liturgical year almost as if the Church can barely contain its passion for the Resurrection. We celebrate Passion/Palm Sunday with shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" We get a head start on the celebrations of the week in the solemn reading of Matthew's account of the

Passion. We prepare for our holiest week by joining in the proclamation of the Lord's Death

on the Cross amid songs of praise and thanksgiving – a suitable finale to our forty days of Lent and an appropriate prelude to our fifty-day celebration of Easter!

Happy Holy Week!

Fr. William Nicholas
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